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The effect of Covid-19 on intraregional tourism of Gulf Cooperation Council countries

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Abstract

Little information is known about the impact of pandemic/epidemic on a tourist's choice of destination. To fulfill this gap, Conservation of Resources Theory and Fear Appeal Theory are used. The current study aims to get first-hand information regarding people's perception of tourism services, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk, and self-efficacy on travel following Covid-19 pandemic. Besides, revealing the impacts of visitors' gender and nationality on all these dimensions. Drawing on a sample of 1,112 valid questionnaires from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which had a domestic or international travel experience, was utilized to collect the data throughout an online survey. The data were analyzed using factor analyses, mean comparison, standard deviation, Mann-Whitney Test & Kruskal-Wallis Test to check the aim and validity of the study. The findings revealed that Covid-19 pandemic influences GCC potential tourists significantly in many ways. Finally, this paper provided some practical implications for reopening the tourism and hospitality business after the Covid-19.

Keywords: *Coronavirus (Covid-19), Perception of tourism services and activities, Perception travel risk, Perception of susceptibility, Self-efficacy on travel, Tourism, GCC countries*

1. Introduction

Coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) is globally acknowledged as the respiratory illness caused by a novel coronavirus that was defined in 2003 as "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2" (SARS-CoV-2). According to World Health Organization the virus first recognized in an outbreak case in Wuhan city, Hubei Province in China, it was initially reported to the WHO on 31st December 2019, after which it prompted the formal declaration of the pandemic a global health emergency on 30th January 2020. Covid-19 is by far the most significant challenge humanity has faced since World War II (WHO, 2020).

Since the emergence of Covid-19, the virus has spread to all continents, cases are rising in the Americas, Asia, and most other parts of the world. Until the writing of this paper in July 2020, there are no potential vaccines or treatments for the virus (Sohrabi *et al.*, 2020). Hence, countries are curbing the spread of the virus through banning travel, quarantines, frequent tests, contact tracing, and treatment, for some countries, instead of shuttering the economy for weeks on end,

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businesses were kept open under strict rules like using sanitizers and taking temperatures before entering business institutions. Public gatherings have been banned to avoid overcrowding. Most countries have continued to hold daily briefings by medical personnel.

While Covid-19 is fundamentally a health crisis, it has impacted the social, religious, economic, and financial structures around the globe. Stock markets have been affected injuriously, and oil prices have decreased. Within weeks, ten million American citizens were declared unemployed, and more experts continue to warn against the worst conditions expected in the global economic and financial structure since World War II. The manager of the International Monitory Fund declared it "a recession at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse." This is the case owing to the cessation of movement, which has restricted some businesses' adequate performance, like travelling, subsequently causing a quick halt worldwide (McKibbin and Fernando, 2020).

Much like the globe, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain, are facing the biggest economic crisis in history as a result of Covid-19, while most of them have been shocked by the drastic drop in oil prices. Institute of International Finance (IIF) anticipates the fiscal deficit in GCC to increase from 2.5% in the year 2019 to about 10.3%; that is, to $144 bn with the assumption that the oil price is at $40 per barrel, and the hydrocarbon revenue is expected to decline from $326 bn to $200 bn in 2020 (McKibbin *et al*., 2020).

Globally, it is estimated that the travel and tourism industry's global revenue will drop by (17%) in 2020, with more than 1 billion loss in international tourist arrivals, which may reach (58% to 78%) of the total arrivals (UNWTO, 2020). Further, the industry expects more than $1.2 tn loss in the export revenues from the tourism industry, and more than 100 million direct tourism jobs are at risk. Most destinations have lost millions of potential visits owing to the cessation of movement in most parts of the globe in the effort to curb coronavirus.

Although the decision-making process varies among tourists who have different levels of income, the level of income is one of the critical external factors of the tourists' decision-making process when determining a tourism destination (Lukrecija et al., 2014). Based on the Conservation Resources Theory, during an economic recession, some people may prefer to conserve their cash for essential consumer goods and necessities of life, such as security and family. Hence, against this background of the damaged caused by Covid-19 on the global economy, including the GCC economy, we argue that GCC outbound tourism may be affected significantly, and following Covid-19, GCC potential tourists may prefer to choose intraregional tourism.

To the best of our knowledge, the current study is the first that examines the impact of epidemic/pandemics on tourist choice of destination, using two theories that are "Conservation Resources Theory and Fear Appeal Theory". Therefore, this paper has four interrelated goals. First, to critically review the literature on the impact of previous pandemics on the economy, and how a reduction in people's income may affect their decisions in choosing a destination. Second, to understand how fear of pandemics and crisis may affect potential tourist decision in choosing a destination. Third, investigate the impact of gender and nationally on the perception of the study dimensions, which include perception of tourism services, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk and self-efficacy in travel following the pandemic of the Covid-19. Finally, to provide practical implications for the tourism and hospitality sectors.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impact of natural crisis on individual income and destination choice

Tourism and hospitality industry is an essential economic sector for many countries (Zana Majed *et al*., 2019). This industry around the world is subject to the impact of concussions, such as crisis and disaster (Wang, 2009). A 'crisis' as defined by Senbeto and Hon (2020) effects failures that are relevant to the internal environment, whereas a disaster is caused by an action in the external environment that may result in an immediate impact. Faulkner (2001) also notes that failure to respond to a disaster makes a crisis.

Due to the socioeconomic effect of the tourism industry (Zana Majed *et al*., 2019), the consequences of crisis can be disastrous and may have long-term impacts on a destination's economy (Kim and Wong, 2006). Rosselló *et al*. (2020) accentuated that disasters cause unexpected changes that disturb the system in which tourism is embedded, and have severe consequences on tourism activities and the country's whole system, such as the economy, individuals, organizations, and communities (Walters *et al*., 2019). Several studies in this literature provide empirical evidence of reductions in tourist arrivals following major crisis (Huang and Min, 2002; Otoo and Kim, 2018). For instance, Senbeto and Hon (2020) indicated that natural disaster, such as pandemic, has an abundant influence on the drop in tourist volume, the use of services and activities at destinations, unstable demand and supply, and tourist plans for travelling.

Further, in 1999 in Taiwan, the earthquake disaster resulted in a 15% drop in international tourist arrivals (Huang and Min, 2002).

In addition, during a natural disaster, the demand for tourism can fluctuate, and economic declines are absolute (Wang, 2009). Hence, the perception of safety and health plays a crucial role in traveler's behavior and decision when a crisis befalls (Floyd *et al*., 2003). Accordingly, tourists will not spend their money to go to a destination, where their safety may be threatened (Chen Joseph and Gursoy, 2001).

Hem *et al*. (2003) contended that some traveler target markets are risk-prospectors and thus respond more positively to the risky trip, while other segments are risk hatred and whereby react more negatively. According to Song *et al.* (2010), the tourism demand for a particular destination can be defined as the amount of tourism products and services, that include tourists' expenditures in the destination and the cost of travel to it; and income levels of those potential tourists. However, the decision-making processes are not the same for all tourists as they have different levels of income.

Thus, in the time of disaster or crisis, fears and anxieties associated with risk may negatively impact tourists' intention to travel to a destination (Hon *et al*., 2014). This is also noted by Papatheodorou *et al.* (2010) and Smeral (2010) who asserted that during an economic recession, some people might prefer to conserve their cash for necessary consumer goods and essentials of life, such as shelter and family necessities, rather than to use it for travel. Hence, those who do travel should not be price sensitive but more concerned about a valuable travel experience.

This effect is clearly shown in the theory of conservation resource, which indicates that resources are things that are valued by individuals, and when individuals perceive an actual or potential loss of resources, such as "income", they attempt to conserve resources in order to deal with the threatening conditions (Hobfoll and Wells, 1998). The theory is based on the principle that individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect the resources that are valuable to them (Halbesleben *et al*., 2014). To the best of our knowledge, no study has ever investigated the effect of coronavirus Covid-19 on a tourists' choice of destination based on their income, using conservation of resource theory. We believe that this is missing in tourism crisis literature.

2.2. Impact of risk on destination image and choice

Image of a destination is an essential concept in tourism marketing literature. The importance of this image is comprehensively acknowledged because it influences the individual's perception of destination choice (Pearlman and Melnik, 2008). Pearlman and colleague described destination image as people's belief, thought or impression about a destination or site. Further, the image of a destination is described as rational pictures someone holds in mind about a specific site from tourism elements, such as infrastructure, cultural, natural, and social attributes (Beerli and Martín, 2004).

In contrast, perception of risk is defined as tourist's perception about risk and unfavorable consequences of purchasing a product and service (Dowling and Staelin, 1994), or performing a certain activity in the destination (Reisinger and Mavondo, 2005). Perception of risk is fundamental in tourists' decision-making process as risk can change conscious decision-making concerning destination image and choice. Yang and Nair (2014) study of risk in tourism destinations, affirmed that risk perception is multidimensional concepts concerning aspects such as uncertainty avoidance, worry, anxiety, or fear (Addo *et al*., 2020). Uncertainty avoidance is defined as the extent to which a person feels frightened or annoyed by obscure, unknown, or uncertain situations (Hofstede, 1980). Therefore, a person with high uncertainty avoidance avoids situations where the results are unanticipated.

Bauer 1960, as cited in (Wang, 2017), claimed that consumer behavior involves risk in the sense that any action of a consumer will produce consequences which he/she cannot anticipate with anything approaching certainty, and some of which at least are likely to be unpleasant' (p. 390). Further, the tourists' purchase and selection behavior can lead to unanticipated outcomes and could result in negative ends due to uncertainty (Assael., 1995). Thus, it has claimed that pandemics and natural crises are significantly influencing the tourist's choice of destination, and his/her consumption behavior in the chosen destination, because of fear of infection (Addo *et al*., 2020; Rosselló *et al*., 2020). This is clearly shown through the theory of fear appeal, which indicates that when fear is aroused, the recipient will become motivated to alleviate the negative impact or influence (Brennan and Binney, 2010). Fear motivates actions, aiming at reducing the unpleasant emotions, or undesirable effects. Nevertheless, very little research investigates the tourist's consumption behavior aspects following disease or pandemic outbreak.

3. Methodology

3.1. Purpose of research

The purpose of this empirical study is to get first-hand information regarding GCC potential tourists regarding their perception of the study dimensions namely; "Perception of Tourism Services, Perception of Susceptibility, Perception of Travel Risk, and Self-efficacy on Travel", following Covid-19. The data were collected from all GCC countries, with people who have previous experience in travelling, as well as they are experiencing now Covid-19. The findings of this study will enrich the tourism and hospitality literature and provide implications to help industry leaders in developing crisis management strategies.

3.2. Design of the questionnaire

Initially, the authors in this study adopted a questionnaire developed by (Cahyanto *et al*., 2016), with adjustment made through modifying, deleting, and increasing items according to the result of the interviews conducted to be finally (17 items). These items are also based on the literature review of the tourist's behavior and decision making on destination choice in the previous pandemics, such as SARS and Ebola. Further, to develop the current survey items, some phone calls and online interviews were conducted with the tourism and hospitality experts and scholars. The current study developed 17 items, which categorized into four dimensions, namely; Perception of Tourism Services and Activities (7 items), Perception of Susceptibility (4 items), Perception of Travel Risk (3 items), and Self-efficacy on Travel (3 items). Except for demographic (7 items), all the survey items were measured by using a 5-point rating scale, ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). Moreover, five items were developed, using multiple-choice questions to understand how GCC potential tourists think about tourism services, activities, infrastructure, landscapes, environment, and climate in this region. These items are:

No.	Items
1	I will not probably travel to some Gulf countries because of the fear of infection of Coronavirus (mention countries/ country).
2	What is the Gulf country that you see as a suitable alternative compared to foreign countries, even after lifting the ban and opening the ports (you can choose more than one country)?
3	What is the most suitable Gulf country in terms of prices of tourism services, you can choose more than one country?
4	What is the most suitable Gulf country in terms of nature, landscape, environment, and climate (you can choose more than one country)?
5	What is the most appropriate Gulf country in terms of the diversity of tourism and leisure activities, and you consider it as suitable destination for you and your family (you can choose more than one country)?

4. Data collection and analyses

The target population is the GCC potential tourists who have interregional and international travel experiences to measure the impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) on the study dimensions. The survey conducted on 4th to 12th June 2020 during the Covid-19 outbreak. Due to the critical situation of quarantines, the survey was distributed among influential people on social media as well as our network, such as coworkers, family, friends, and relatives who distribute it to their networks. The authors received 1,112 valid questionnaires from the GCC countries that include Saudi Arabia (SA), (n = 371), United Arab Emirates (UAE), (n = 327), Kuwait (n = 134), Oman (n = 107), Qatar (n = 14), Bahrain (n = 85), and other (n = 74). The authors of this study attempted to increase the number of participants from Qatar, but because of the political issue that exists among some of the GCC countries and Qatar, the authors could not collect more. Since the sample received from Qatar is small, the authors decided not to use it in the study. For data analysis, factor analysis, mean comparison, and standard deviation, Mann-Whitney Test and Kruskal-Wallis tests are used.

4.1. Data analysis

4.1.1. Index verification

To ensure the construct validity, factor analysis with varimax rotation is conducted to identify the loading factor of the 17 items of the survey. After performing the analysis, the authors found that all items were perfectly loaded into four

dimensions, as mentioned above. These results evidence and confirm that the four dimensions extract and generalize item data and are highly explorative and valid. Moreover, the Cronbach's alpha value for the four dimensions is 0.785, confirming its reliability.

4.1.2. Profile of respondents

The online survey was filled in by 1,112 respondents. Males represented 79.6% of the sample, and females represented 19.9%. The age varied from 15 years old to 61 and above. Individuals of age who range from 31 to 40 and 41 to 50 represented the highest rate of respondents, 40.1%, 31.2%, respectively. Most of the respondents have a college/ university degree, which represented 61.5% of the sample, and 23.8% have an advanced degree. While participant with monthly income between 5,000 to 10,000 Saudi Riyal (SR) represented 17.9% of the sample, and 33.1% of the sample get a monthly income of 30,000 SR and above. 33.8% of the respondents have Saudi nationality.

5. Results

5.1. Perception of Tourism Services

The results of the survey show that the respondents have a rational perception toward the tourism services in the GCC with a moderate mean (3.49). From Table 1, we can see that Item 7 has the highest mean in the perception of tourism services and activities dimension (3.96). In addition, findings highlight as in Item 6 that respondents agreed that GCC countries enjoy a robust tourism infrastructure with a mean (3.95).

Table 1: Factor Analyses and Mean Comparisons

Items of Hypothetic Dimensions	Factor Analyses					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
PERCEPTION OF TOURISM SERVICES (α = .84)						3.49	0.88
1. Traveling to the GCC countries is appropriate since the prices of the tourism activities and services are suitable for me and my family	0.80					3.19	1.26
2. Traveling to the GCC countries is appropriate, since they enjoy reliable and transparent pricing policies for the tourism services.	0.79					3.56	1.16
3. The GCC countries will be a suitable alternative (in light of the Coronavirus pandemic) than to travel to foreign countries, due to their geographical and climatic diversity and the possession of some of their cities to beautiful scenery and atmosphere	0.69					3.31	1.29
4. Any reduction in my financial income, as result of the action taken to combat the Coronavirus, will might encourage me to travel within the GCC instead of travel to a foreign country (abroad the GCC)	0.61					3.13	1.32
5. Traveling for tourism within the GCC countries is a suitable alternative to travelling to other foreign countries	0.60					3.34	1.41
6. GCC countries in general, enjoy a robust tourism infrastructure, such as "hotels, furnished apartments, restaurants, malls" that meet my family and personal needs	0.59					3.95	1.06
7. I trust in preventive and precautionary measures & actions that have been taken by the GCC governments to reduce the spread of the Coronavirus in all tourist and non-tourist cities.	0.57					3.96	1.07

Table 1 (Cont.)

Items of Hypothetic Dimensions	Factor Analyses					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
PERCEPTION OF SUSCEPTIBILITY (α = .64)						3.17	0.91
8. I will probably travel within the GCC countries for tourism and leisure	0.71				3.10	1.38	
9. I will feel very comfortable traveling between GCC countries		0.70				3.35	1.32
10. It is preferable to travel (by car) to the GCC countries instead of traveling (by air) to avoid infection with the Coronavirus		0.63				3.49	1.29
11. I will probably travel within the GCC countries for business or trade purposes		0.47				2.74	1.26

5.2. Perceived susceptibility

Results in Table 1 indicate that GCC potential tourists have almost moderate for perceived susceptibility dimension with a mean (3.17). The highest response is for preference for travelling by car rather than by air as Item 10 with a mean (3.49). The GCC potential tourists also feel comfortable for travelling between GCC countries, as indicated in Item 9 with a mean (3.35). Nevertheless, surprisingly, respondents show a moderate preference for travelling among GCC countries for tourism and leisure in the time of Covid-19 as in Item 8 with a mean (3.10), with a very low preference for travelling for business or trade as we can see in item 11 with a mean (2.74).

5.3. Perception of travel risk

Results in Table 2 show that the GCC potential tourists have a high perception of travel risk with a mean (3.46). They agree with Item 14 that "coronavirus is a very serious disease" with a mean (3.81). The respondents also score slightly high in Item 13 and Item 12, with a mean (3.36 and 3.36 respectively).

Table 2: Factor Analyses and Mean Comparisons

Items of Hypothetic Dimensions	Factor Analyses					Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
PERCEIVED TRAVEL RISK (α = .64)					3.46	0.87	
1. Traveling between GCC countries will be fraught with risk of Coronavirus infection				0.76		3.20	1.17
2. Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic may take more than a year to be eliminated in the Gulf countries (GCC)			0.73		3.36	1.16	
3. Coronavirus is a very serious disease			0.67		3.81	1.10	
SELF-EFFICACY ON TRAVEL (α = .71)					3.90	0.81	
4. I can recognize the symptoms of Coronavirus in case I get infected while traveling				0.81	3.73	1.05	
5. While traveling, I know what to do in case I get some symptoms that indicate that I am suspected of being infected with the Coronavirus.				0.81	3.93	1.02	
6. I am confident that I am able to understand the health instructions for Coronavirus preventing prior to, during and afterwards travel					0.69	4.05	1.01

5.4. Self-efficacy on travel

The results in Table 2 also show that the respondents have high confidence in their ability to understand the health instructions of coronavirus pandemic with a mean (3.90). The highest response is for Item 17 with a mean (4.05). The GCC potential tourists also know what they should do in case they get some symptoms as indicated in Item 15 and 16, with a mean (3.93) and (3.73) respectively.

5.5. The impacts of gender and nationality on study dimensions

The survey also conducted from 4th to 12th June 2020, during the Covid-19 outbreak to discover the impact of gender and nationality on the GCC potential tourists regarding the perception of tourism services, perception of susceptibility, perception of travel risk and self-efficacy on travel following the Covid-19 crisis. We considered the gender and nationality as independent variables and the four dimensions as dependent variables, the analyses used were Mann-Whitney Test and Kruskal-Wallis test for the gender and nationality, respectively. Only results with $p = 0.00 > 0.05$ are described in the following sections.

5.6. Perception to tourism services and activities

In terms of gender, the findings of Table 3 show no significant differences between males and females in the "Perception of Tourism Services and Activities" dimension with ($p = 0.63$). The findings highlight that males are slightly higher in their belief in tourism services in GCC countries with (mean rank = 549 compared to 537). In Table 3, we can see significant differences between males and females in four items 3, 4 and 5; respectively; Items 3 (with a mean rank of 558 compared to 501); Items 4 (with a mean rank of 556 compared to 508); and Items 5 (with a mean rank of 559 compared to 495).

Table 3: The impacts of gender and nationality on perception of tourism services and Activities

	Gender		Nationality							
	Male (n= 874)	Female (n= 212)	Sig.	SA (n=371)	UAE (n=327)	Kuwait (n=134)	Oman (n=107)	Bahrei (n=85)	Other (n=74)	Sig.
	Meanrank									
Dimension Average	549	537	0.63	474	624	488	599	641	533	0.00
Item 1	547	545	0.95	443	643	517	584	668	546	0.00
Item 2	555	514	0.08	514	570	545	564	638	522	0.01
Item 3	558	501	0.01	453	605	565	654	619	529	0.00
Item 4	556	508	0.04	535	556	489	620	595	550	0.01
Item 5	559	495	0.01	524	557	550	570	648	505	0.02
Item 6	550	531	0.40	505	602	503	532	648	537	0.00
Item 7	550	531	0.40	551	572	491	563	581	491	0.05

In term of nationality, Table 3 depicts that there is significant differences in the "Perception of Tourism Services" dimension with ($p = 0.00$), where the highest is Bahrain with (mean rank = 614) and the lowest is Saudi Arabia (SA) with (mean rank = 474). From Table 3, we can see significant differences in Item 1 and 2, where the highest score is Bahrain with (mean rank = 668 and 638; respectively) and the lowest score is SA with (mean rank = 443 and 514; respectively). The results also show significant differences in Items 3 and 4, where Omani potential tourists score the highest with (mean rank = 654 and 620; respectively), and the lowest is SA in Item 3 with (mean rank = 453), and Kuwait in Item 4 with (mean rank = 489). Further, the results illustrate significant differences in Items 5 and 6, where the highest is Bahrain with (mean rank = 648 and 648; respectively), and the lowest is SA in Item 5 with (mean rank = 524) and Kuwait in Items 6 with (mean rank = 503).

5.7. Perception of susceptibility

In terms of gender, the findings of Table 4 depict that there are significant differences in the "Perception of Susceptibility" dimension with ($p = 0.00$). The results reflect that males have a higher perception of susceptibility than females with

(mean rank = 570 compared to 452). The table also shows significant differences between males and females in all four items 8, 9, 10 and 11; respectively, where males score the higher than females.

Table 4: the impacts of gender and nationality on Perception of Susceptibility

	Gender			Nationality						
	Male (n= 874)	Female (n= 212)	Sig.	SA (n=371)	UAE (n=327)	Kuwait (n=134)	Oman (n=107)	Bahrei (n=85)	Other (n=74)	Sig.
	Meanrank									
Dimension Average	570	452	0.00	543	492	665	589	639	469	0.00
Item 8	567	465	0.00	530	544	592	616	585	456	0.05
Item 9	565	474	0.00	522	541	654	549	637	433	0.00
Item 10	561	488	0.00	549	508	641	546	632	481	0.00
Item 11	558	502	0.02	505	521	535	654	647	662	0.00

In term of nationality, Table 4 depicts that there is a significant difference in the "Perception of Susceptibility" dimension with (p = 0.00), where the highest is Kuwait with (mean rank = 665), and the lowest is United Arab Emirates (UAE) with (mean rank = 492). The results further show significant differences in Items 9, 10 and 11, where Kuwaiti potential tourists score the highest in Item 9 and 10 with (mean rank = 654 and 641; respectively), while the lowest is SA in Item 9 with (mean rank = 522), and UAE in Item 10 with (mean rank = 508). However, Table 4 illustrates significant differences in Items 11, where the highest is Oman with (mean rank = 654), and the lowest is SA with (mean rank = 505).

5.8. Perception of travel risk

In term of gender, the results of Table 5 show that there is a significant difference in the "Perception of Travel Risk" dimension with (p = 0.01). The findings highlight that females score higher in the perception of susceptibility than males with (mean rank = 593 compared to 535). In the table, we can see significant differences between males and females in two items 12 and 13; respectively, where females score higher in Item 12 with (mean rank = 598 compared to 534). Further, females score higher than males in Item 13 with (mean rank = 602 compared to 533).

Table 5: The impacts of gender and Nationality on Perception of Travel Risk

	Gender			Nationality						
	Male (n= 874)	Female (n= 212)	Sig.	SA (n=371)	UAE (n=327)	Kuwait (n=134)	Oman (n=107)	Bahrei (n=85)	Other (n=74)	Sig.
	Meanrank									
Dimension Average	535	593	0.01	580	551	504	503	544	542	0.12
Item 12	534	598	0.01	588	541	522	532	504	520	0.07
Item 13	533	602	0.00	547	544	553	549	559	572	0.98
Item 14	540	574	0.14	605	561	493	440	507	527	0.00

In term of nationality, Table 5 reflects that there is no significant difference in the "Perception of Travel Risk" dimension with (p = 0.12). The findings in Table 5 show a significant difference in Items 14, where Saudi potential tourists score the highest with (mean rank = 605), while the lowest is Omani potential tourists with (mean rank = 440).

5.9. Self-efficacy on travel

Table 6 illustrates that there is no significant difference in the "Self-efficacy on Travel" dimension with (p = 0.90). In term of nationality, the table depicts that there is significant differences in the "Perception of Susceptibility" dimension with

(p = 0.00), where the highest is SA with (mean rank = 583), and the lowest is Kuwait with (mean rank = 401). The results in Table 6 represent significant differences in Items 15 and 16, where UAE potential tourists score the highest in Item 15 with (mean rank = 577), while the lowest is Kuwait with (mean rank = 447). In addition, the table highlights that Bahraini potential tourists score the highest in Item 16 with (mean rank = 589), and the lowest is Kuwait with (mean rank = 422).

Table 6: The impacts of gender and Nationality on Self-efficacy on Travel

	Gender			Nationality						
	Male (n= 874)	Female (n= 212)	Sig.	SA (n=371)	UAE (n=327)	Kuwait (n=134)	Oman (n=107)	Bahrei (n=85)	Other (n=74)	Sig.
	Meanrank									
Dimension Average	547	544	0.90	583	565	401	547	548	586	0.00
Item 15	548	541	0.76	554	577	447	549	562	577	0.00
Item 16	549	537	0.59	574	566	422	560	589	525	0.00
Item 17	550	533	0.45	546	568	490	530	567	599	0.08

6. Discussion

Previous infectious disease outbreaks, such as SARS or Swine Flu (H1N1), influenza pandemic, have had far-reaching impacts on travel and tourism, specifically with enhanced health screenings and increased travel delays due to the shutdown of airline travel. However, since its rapid spread among humans which led to paralyzed economies across the globe, Covid-19 outbreak has much greater damage to the tourism and hospitality industry than all other previous crisis in term of cases infected (WHO, 2020).

In the current study, most of the respondents in our sample indicated that they have a concern regarding travelling during Covid-19. One of the most interesting findings, which is always debatable in GCC, is the perception of tourism services and activities. Among GCC countries, Saudi Arabia and Oman enjoy a fabulous natural attraction in many destinations, which was reflected clearly in the responses to a question asked about the most suitable GCC countries in term of nature, landscapes, environment, and climate. The results show that (69% with 858 respondents choose Oman, and 64% with 793 choose Saudi Arabia); nevertheless, these two countries have poor tourism infrastructure.

In contrast, UAE has distinctive tourism infrastructure, such as services and activities that are preferable by other GCC nations. This was clear in the responses to the question: “What is the GCC country that you see as a suitable alternative compared to foreign countries, even after lifting the ban and opening the ports”, where (65% with 799 respondents) scored for UAE followed by Saudi Arabia with (44% with 547 respondents). However, we still very often come across such statements that: (1) some countries have tremendous tourism potential, but no development is taking place in this regard; (2) there has been a fall in tourism arrivals, especially from the Gulf countries; (3) destination is no more an attraction the way it used to be, especially Saudi Arabia and Oman; and (4) prices are much higher than other Middle East countries, and sometimes higher than other countries worldwide; and (5) we have lack of quality of services in some GCC countries.

These statements were reflected in the responses, where GCC potential tourist showed a preference for travelling internationally than intraregional. The findings of this study also show significant differences in the perception of tourism services and activities among nationalities, where Bahraini’s potential tourists have a higher belief in their tourism services, activities and prices. In comparison, Saudis have less belief in these aspects. This result is perhaps because Bahrain is more developed in tourism services and activities than Saudi Arabia since Bahrain depends on tourism as one of main sources of income.

In addition, the findings reflect that GCC people do not believe that travelling to the GCC countries is appropriate because tourism activities and services prices are not suitable for all families. These countries always exaggerate in prices of services and activities compared to other countries in the world, and this is one of the main reasons of preference for outbound tourism. The relatively low scores also confirm this finding in item 4 as GCC potential tourists believe that even though financial income may be reduced in the coming months or years because of the economic recession, and the high expenses the governments made on implementing precautionary measures, GCC people still believe that the intraregional tourism is not the best alternative. This outcome is consistent with the theory of conservation

of resources, where a low score could be because of high expenses of intraregional tourism compared to an international one, which may cause losing their saved money. Another possibility is GCC people prefer international tourism more than intraregional because they are not willing to spend money on low-quality services.

Most GCC people trust the procedures taken by the GCC governments to prevent spreading the virus for tourist and non-tourist cities. This trust perhaps is because the government transacts the pandemic seriously, by spending billions of dollars to prevent spreading the virus and implementing precautionary measures. Meanwhile, the governments ensured free of charge treatment for any person infected by Covid-19, either is citizen, resident, or even illegal resident in the country.

GCC potential tourists believe that intraregional tourism would be more appropriate alternative than international travel since their countries enjoy reliable and transparent pricing policies for the tourism services and enjoy a robust tourism infrastructure, such as hotels, furnished apartments, restaurants, malls that meet people's needs. These scores are higher than expected because although the GCC population represents only (20%) of the Middle East region's total population, they are important source markets for outbound tourists from the Middle East region (UNWTO, 2018). These countries contribute over two-thirds of the outbound travel volume, and three-fourths of the total international travel expenditure from the same region. Saudi tourists alone spent more than $20 bn in 2018 on outbound tourism. The UNWTO report indicated that the GCC's per-capita for international tourism expenditure was 6.5 times higher than the international average in 2017, with expenditure estimated to be more than $60 bn in 2017, up from $40 bn in 2010 (UNWTO, 2018).

Therefore, these findings are possible because the precautionary measures taken by the GCC governments, and the stress put on people, due to quarantine for months, would cause for GCC potential tourists to decide to travel intraregional even though prices are higher than outbound tourism; still prices in the GCC countries are transparent. Nevertheless, this preference is not with full comfort, as findings show moderate response to the item that GCC potential tourists feel comfortable when travelling between GCC countries. This result is consistent with (Cahyanto *et al*., 2016).

The GCC governments have led an intensive awareness campaign since early March 2020, and this campaign increased the awareness of GCC people with Covid-19, and how to deal with it if they suspect infection. Thus, GCC people now are highly aware of and educated about Covid-19, which perhaps have led them to have a high feeling of self-efficacy, and show a preference for travelling either intraregional or internationally, after the ban is lifted. Cowling *et al*. (2010) indicated that the individual, who reports higher feelings of self-efficacy, reports lower levels of susceptibility in acquiring transmissible diseases. This finding could be explained by the fact that GCC potential tourists may firmly believe that since they have control over behavior choices associated with an ailment, they are at a lower risk for transmission.

The current study does not show significant differences between males and females in self-efficacy on travel. However, drawing on "fear appeal theory" the findings show that GCC women are more risk perceived than men of having or travelling within GCC countries during coronavirus disease (Covid-19) either for tourism and leisure or for trade and business. This finding perhaps is because psychologically females, in general, have more "ethic of care" and responsibility than males, and they have more concern with becoming sick or having their loved ones become sick (Cahyanto *et al*., 2016). Further, ordinarily GCC women culturally are responsible for taking care of their children, the elderly, and all family members; thus, she may feel scared of travelling because if she is affected with Covid-19, then she may transfer the disease to her family members. Another possibility is that GCC women who perceive risk from infectious diseases may be more likely to act upon those preventive measures adding to increased feelings of self-efficacy. This finding is consistent with (Otoo and Kim, 2018; Wen *et al*., 2005).

Interestingly, when comparing travel for trade or business purpose and travel for tourism and leisure purpose, we found that GCC potential tourists, especially males responded higher for tourism and leisure purpose (mean = 3.10 compared to mean = 2.74). This outcome is probably due to GCC people believe that although travel for trade and business is essential, it is not more important than travelling for tourism and leisure, especially in this critical time, when people are quarantined at home for months.

6.1. Managerial implications

Several managerial implications can be gained through understanding the perceptions and the reactions of the GCC potential tourists toward destination choice during Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic and the following. According to Kim *et al*. (2005), quick recognition of what is happening and triggering predetermined plans to prevent the crisis is the only way to turn a crisis into an advantage. Thus, the findings of this research provide valuable insight to policymakers,

tourism organizations, and managers in several ways.

7. Conclusion

First, this research has shown that the GCC potential tourists are significantly concerned with the contract of Covid-19; hence, developing safety practices is the main strategy of planning to enhance the tourist's perceptions toward security and certainty of the destination. Further, destinations need to gain the trust of the tourists by demonstrating the health procedures that have been taken by the organization to maintain the safety of the visitors if they want to increase intraregional tourism.

Second, with the results of this research in mind, we suggest that the policymakers should investigate whether the quality of the tourism products and services suits the purchasing price and meet the tourist's expectations or not; if not, they should be set aright at once. Third, authorities in GCC countries should set festivals and tourism seasons in various areas, and pay attention to whether the tourism products and services are suitable for all societies and meet all family members' needs if they want to increase demand for tourism. Finally, and most importantly, we recommend that tourism organizations should follow innovative initiatives and solutions to attract intraregional tourists, such as activating electronic services to reduce direct personal contact among individuals who may enhance the flow of the tourists to the destination.

8. Limitation and future research

Even though this study has several contributions, it also has some limitations. The first limitation of this research is that the data collected during the Covid-19 outbreak, at a time, fear and anxiety of the infection is too high among people; thus, this feeling may affect responses. Therefore, it is suggested for future research to repeat this empirical research following the pandemic in a different context. Second, this study was conducted in GCC region; thus, future research should investigate other region or geographic areas. Finally, GCC having intraregional and outbound travel experiences were the population target; future research should target people having travel experience and non-travel experience for comparison.

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